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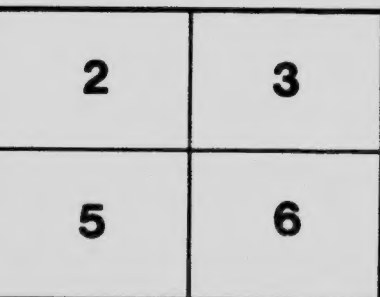
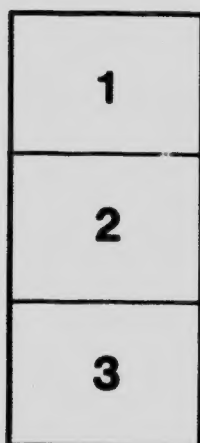
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Some Reasons for the Differences in the Tone of
Politics in England, Canada and the
United States

A paper read by O. Mowat Biggar, B.A., before the
Young Men's Liberal Club of Toronto,
on January 13th, 1902

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Some Reasons for the Differences in the Tone of Politics in England, Canada and United States

This paper is not a discussion of what constitutes political tone, nor is it an attempt to show that the tone of politics is higher in England or in Canada than elsewhere. I have not the practical experience of politics necessary for either investigation and have therefore contented myself with assuming what most of us believe, —that political morality is better and politics generally on a higher plane in England than here, and here than the United States. Assuming these differences, I have merely tried to ascertain to what conditions, political or social, they may be attributed.

I have no doubt that I have committed many faults and among others the academic fault of taking too narrow a view—of assigning results to particular causes instead of to general ones, and conversely of restricting within too narrow limits the effect of certain known conditions, but my hope has been rather to supply a basis for a discussion of a subject as well important as interesting than to convey anything of value, or to suggest anything novel.

The inquiry is restricted within reasonably narrow limits by the similarity of the three countries in population, in traditions and in forms of government, England and the United States being the farthest apart, and Canada a compromise, sharing with the United States many of the characteristics of its social life, and with England its form of government. Therefore, in considering the differences in the political tone due to differences in the structure of society, Canada has been grouped with the United States, and with England in estimating those due to differences in the form of government.

The causes of difference in the tone of politics do not, I believe, lie in the subjects giving rise to differences of political opinion. I have thought otherwise. I have thought that because politics in England were concerned with imperial matters, while Canadian politics were almost purely local, therefore in England questions were more broadly discussed, personalities less freely indulged in, accusations of corruption less often made than in Canada, and that similarly the tone of Provincial politics was lower than that of Dominion politics because in the Provinces the issues were of less magnitude. Upon further reflection, however, I have become convinced that the subjects of political difference are of minor importance. It seems to me that whether it is a question of the management of the forces on the frontier of India so as best to insure the security of the empire, or a question of the advisability of colonisation roads or of the disposal of timber limits in Ontario, it is possible that

discussion of the one should be on as high a plane, as free from trivialities as discussion of the others. It is surely not because Provincial interests are narrower than Imperial that while in Ontario a foreign investment by one minister of the Crown and a domestic investment by another should lately have been two of the strongest pleas for a change of government, in England such matters of personal convenience would not be considered proper subjects of public political discussion, even if they were worthy of remark. Federal politics in the United States, dealing as they do with questions affecting more than twice as many people as in England, and, as in England, with the relations of the domestic and foreign governments and of subject peoples to the home population, should be as broad and free from the unessential as they are in the old country. We know that this is not so: we know that United States federal politics are in some ways as personal, as trivial, as the politics of one of the smaller States of the Union. We are forced to look elsewhere for the causes of difference in tone, or at least for the primary cause, for I foresee that when I suggest that it is to the politicians that the difference must primarily be attributed, I will be met with the answer that the difference between, e. g., Provincial and Dominion politicians in Canada is itself due to the difference in the magnitude of the questions with which they have to deal. This argument, however, does not apply to the case of England and the United States, and granting that in Canada our better men are, speaking generally, attracted rather to the Dominion Parliament than to the Provincial legislatures, the difference between English and United States politics has yet to be explained.

England is distinguished from both Canada and the United States by its strongly defined distinctions of class—relics of feudalism to which are due the class sentiment which there exists and is marked in men of high social position, who belong by birth to a pre-eminent social class, by a feeling partly expressed in the words *noblesse oblige*. Such men have usually a standard of what may be done and must be avoided by members of the class, differing from the standards accepted in the lower social ranks, and in fact maintained by constant comparison with such lower standards.

Although brilliant exceptions will occur to everyone, it may be truly said that English public men generally, and English political leaders almost invariably, spring from the highest classes of society. The constitution calls for the co-operation of the peers in the making and administration of the law, and the example of the peers is followed by most people of wealth and influence throughout the country, so that a political career is looked upon as an Englishman's highest goal. As the leisure and the means required to pursue an avocation offering no pecuniary rewards are not wanting, the result is that in England the social standing of the politicians is higher, public confidence in them greater and politics generally on a more lofty level than in perhaps any other country in the world.

In England the man on the street knows that the men at the head of affairs are the best men in the community. He is often familiar with the identity of their ancestors, and with the fact those ancestors have in their time been charged with the government of the country: he is confident that the present rulers are too jealous of the family reputation, too regardful of the duties and responsibilities of the class

to which they belong, to admit of a doubt of their absolute honesty ; and he rests secure in the knowledge that their personal interest is an almost negligible quantity. Things are very different on this side of the water where class distinctions are almost non-existent. We have no peerage destined by birth to share in the government. We have no land-owning class who are at liberty to devote their time to public affairs and to whom the public service is a family tradition if not a duty. A parliamentary life is looked forward to as a goal by very few of the young men of the country. Our parliamentarians become such sometimes by chance, sometimes to gain influence, sometimes by pressure of friends, sometimes to make a living, possibly sometimes from corrupt motives—for almost any reason except that a political career is a high ambition worthy of a life's devotion for its own sake, a motive which, I believe, sends into politics more French-speaking than English-speaking Canadians, though of either very few. Our public men are generally either men who must make politics yield them a living, or old men who having spent most of their lives at other businesses, turn to politics at last as a recreation. To be a representative of the wealthy and cultured class, is at least in the United States, rather against a public man than in his favour. Indeed, so slight a recommendation is it that the prejudice has there given birth to the political sneer "The dude in politics."

However this may be here, it is evident that, patrician or plebeian, every politician, both in Canada and in the United States, stands for himself. He represents no class. Who his family are or who his forebears were is a matter of indifference to the public. His ability to govern, his disinterestedness, his probity even, he must prove by his own acts. Nothing is taken for granted, and in making proof, he is often hampered by the public knowledge or suspicion of his narrow means and by accusations of corruption, stupidity, self-interest (whether well or ill-founded) on the part of his opponents, for it is good politics for opponents to render the proof of capacity and honesty as difficult as possible. In England to suggest that a minister of the Crown or even a prominent public man has been guilty of misapplication of public funds, the sale of public office, or personal advancement by illicit means, is a matter of moment, to be undertaken with caution, after due scrutiny of evidence, in all temperance and sobriety, and with at least apparent regret. To do the like for any public man in Canada or the United States is part of the political game, to be done on every possible occasion, on the merest whisper of rumour, with exulting and triumphant cries and appeals to the electors to turn the spoilers out of office (and it might be added, let others in)—all of which may be ascertained by the perusal of almost any issue of some morning dailies not a hundred miles from Toronto. This is bad, but it is inevitable. Everywhere politics, as distinguished from statesmanship, consists in getting into power, and when there, staying there. The question is only, what is the most expedient way of attaining the desired result. English public men are, broadly speaking, above personal suspicion in the public mind, and to make a personal attack upon one of them is almost always inexpedient. Canadian and American politicians are generally not above suspicion. In the nature of things they cannot be so until they individually prove it and a personal attack is usually a safe weapon, though in Canada there are times when, the proof of uprightness and fair-dealing have been made, personalities are for the time abandoned as use-

less. Such a time is in some small measure in Dominion politics the present—a state of affairs due in part to the Prime Minister, but in part also to the leader of the opposition—and other occasions will occur to everyone when not only Dominion but Provincial party politics have been temporarily lifted out of the mire by the unassailable character of the political leaders.

This cannot, however, be said of the United States politics. Across the line a public man is occasionally deified, but never until after death, when he becomes a "statesman" as the word was defined by an American who, even before the assassination of President McKinley, said that a statesman was a politician who was dead. As a general rule, politics in the States are marked by constant vituperation, constant accusation, constant whispers—almost shouts—of corruption—much more constant, and made with vastly greater definiteness and verisimilitude than in Canada. Personalities are to be expected in view of the composition of the political class, but why should the general tone of politics be lower than in Canada? It is so, I think, because of the difference in the form of party government, which results in the absence in the United States of party leaders as we know them.

The Democratic and the Republican parties are abstractions—terms used to differentiate the ideas supposed to be shared continuously by the great contending factions, into the constitution of which no personal element need necessarily enter. A change of policy involves no change of personal opinion on the part of any responsible leader, nor any change of allegiance from one leader to another on the part of rank and file. If a temporary change of view is sufficiently wide-spread, the party designation may be applied to those holding the new views and then again used to denote the old, as witness the case of the Democratic party, for a while divided into the Democrats and the Gold Democrats; now into the Democrats and Bryanites, the word Democrat in each case signifying a different set of opinions. The adoption of the silver plank involved no treachery to Senator Hill; the return to gold was not a betrayal of Mr. Bryan, since faithfulness to either was no part of the duty of any man who called himself a Democrat. In Canada, such a change would be impossible. Here the party policy must be reasonably consistent owing to the consistency required of the personal opinions of the leader around whom the party revolves and upon whom its success largely depends. That the Liberals are in power at Ottawa is chiefly because they are the living Laurier and his followers, while the Conservatives are only the followers of the dead Sir John.

In brief, a party in the United States is composed of individuals; in Canada, the leaders and their followers compose the party. Across the line, the allegiance of the casual elector is claimed every four years on behalf of the party's presidential candidate—a man probably till then almost altogether unknown but to whom are now attributed not only all the private virtues but also the national party platform chosen for the occasion. If he is defeated, his public career ends in a short six months. His defeat has disqualified him from future political prominence, since it will be necessary at the next election to run on a new platform a man not committed to the discarded planks of the old. Even if our candidate is elected, his political career is not greatly prolonged. He enters the White House to become a bureaucrat for four years or eight years, at the end of which he, like his defeated opponent,

will be automatically retired into private life. Having received from his party the highest office in its gift, there is no reason for his continuing longer in public life. During his term of office, his lieutenants will not be necessarily, nor are they usually, public men. The management of a local industry, or the practice of law sufficiently qualifies a man for the control of the most important department of government for a few years, after the lapse of which he will, as must all Americans who attain to high public office, return to private life without the hope or expectation of further political perment.

Compare this with our system. Here a man before he can hope to share in the government of the country must have undergone a long course of parliamentary training; if his party be in power he may, by virtue of his proved qualities or because of the weight his name carries in the country, be chosen to fill a subordinate position in the government: if his party be not in power, he may become known as a prominent lieutenant of the party leader; and after a further course of training in the management of his department, or in the criticism of the policy and administration of the government, he may by reason of the reputation for ability and honesty which he has thereby acquired in the House, or in the country at large, be chosen as the leader of the party and will become Prime Minister if he succeeds, or leader of H. M. Loyal Opposition if he fails, in obtaining the suffrages of the electorate. One or other of these positions he may then and probably will hold until old age or death overtake him.

The consequence is not only that we have more experienced administrators, but also that our political leaders must be the men of the highest standing in their respective parties. It is to the leaders that the public looks for the proper conduct of the public business. The chances of the party's return to power depend upon the opinion the public has formed of their ability and uprightness during their previous public life. Each party is to some extent identified with its leaders. Their acts cannot be disowned, and they must therefore be men to whom the party can safely entrust its political future, as well as the immediate present. Everything tends to compel each party to place at its head the very best material at its command, and these leaders thus chosen are not merely titular heads; they lead in fact as well as in name. They set the political tone, which in the United States, instead of being set by the best men is set by no one higher than the rank and file—by the consensus of opinion in the party—and it is consequently lower than it would be were our system carried out by the same individuals.

Due also to the absence of permanent recognized leaders is the undue prominence in the United States of the machine. Here the party organization centres in the recognized responsible party heads. To them are responsible the men in charge of the machine, who are merely the hired servants of the party, and whose very names are unknown to the general public. There on the other hand the men in charge of the machine are well known as the possessors of political power. As the nominal party leaders are only temporarily so and as these machine politicians devote their lives to the consolidation of their political authority, they acquire an overwhelming weight in the councils of the party—so much so that the technical American name of "boss" has become universally familiar. The party bosses construct the party plat-

form; they make and unmake presidents; they dictate to the responsible executive the mode in which the party patronage is to be distributed; they even name the individuals who are to be rewarded. Self-appointed, they are responsible to no one—neither to a leader nor to the party at large; and they are not in politics for their health. They cannot make an honest living out of politics and as they live upon their political earnings their influence tends strongly to lower the political tone. Since the road to the highest political preferment leads through their favour, not through public life, every man who desires to attain success by means of politics allies himself with the machine. This the best men will not do, and we find therefore that not only are the best men not chosen to lead (for any peg will do to hang a temporary policy upon) but they are actually excluded from political life, the result being that state of public indifference which good Americans are so constantly deploring. There the machine runs the party. Here and in England the party no doubt runs the necessary machine, but it is kept in the background and he who mentions it above a whisper does so at his peril. The men who in this country are admittedly in politics for a living are men of no political consideration.

Our party system also provides in the party discipline at the same time a safeguard against the indulgence of personal spite and a strong check upon individual corruption. In the United States there is little or no party discipline. Each member of a party is within wide limits, free to blaze out his own path. No one is in command. Every result must be attained by individual effort, and this necessarily involves "log-rolling"—another term of American origin used to express neither the complete absence of self-interest nor the disappearance of the individual in the organization. The party in the United States (I cannot repeat it too often) is of too little importance; the individual of too much. The Pauncefote Treaty was rejected because Senator Davis and Secretary Hay, both Republicans, could not get along together. The former was jealous because the latter had been chosen to negotiate the treaty, which as Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations he had power to kill. With the assistance of Senator Foraker, another Republican, he exercised his power. Was the President or was the Republican party to blame because Senator Davis could not pull with Secretary Hay? Surely neither. It was a mere matter of personal feeling, and if the country suffered in its expression, its hurt must be attributed only to the immediate parties, and to the system which permitted them to injure the country in settling their private accounts.

In the United States, the individual alone suffers if he is bought and detected as having been bought. He may be personally corrupt, but no stigma attaches to the party of which he calls himself a member. If an electorate is debauched, no one beyond the local managers are to blame, and even if they are visited with merited censure, the reputation of the party at large is not affected. The corrupt persons are always supposed to be influenced solely by self-interest. Each is considered to be fighting his own hand first. In Canada, on the other hand, the first motive imputed is always a party motive. Every politician is a member of an organized party and subject to its discipline. He bears allegiance to one leader or another. If he is corrupted, or corrupts others, the party is called upon to answer for his act. A party rises or falls in the public estimation, and thereby increases or decreases the chances

of its return to power, by the success or failure of its efforts to keep its members on the straight and narrow path, and to conceal any momentary lapses from it. The organization is responsible; the leaders are responsible, and as their reputations are as important to them as a woman's, they must see to it that no spot is so remarkable as to attract notice. West Elgin was a severe blow to Mr. Ross, counteracted it is true by South Ontario, though the effect of the latter was weakened by the leaderless condition of the Conservative party. There was no one to take the blame. The warding off of dire punishment for the double shuffle was attributable, as the manoeuvre itself was attributed, to the cleverness of Sir John Macdonald, which his successors are not expected to be able to imitate, but the Pacific Scandal very seriously injured the party, although, under Sir John's able management, it recovered much more quickly than it would otherwise have done. These are merely instances of occurrences common enough in the United States, but against which, or, at all events, against the exposure of which—ultimately the same thing—the strong influence of party organization with responsible leaders is constantly working in Canada.

Had we the social system of England, the tone of our politics would be as high as it is in the Old Country. Were we to exchange our form of government for that of the States, politics would be as dirty a game here as it is there. We should, I think, thank God that, though we cannot imitate England, even if we would, we can at least avoid, and seem for the present at all events to have escaped, sinking ourselves into the Great American Republic.



